



Photography by Brigetta Giles

# Forest Legacy

By *Brigetta Giles*

Stewardship Coordinator, Alabama Forestry Commission

**T**here are approximately 10 billion acres of forest on this planet we call home. This represents only about one-third of the earth. However, nearly 42 million acres of this forest disappear each year. This trend will continue as cities and populations grow, with more and more forest being converted into residential and commercial development.

As urban expansion increases, there is a greater need for public access to nature and a desire for sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of our busy lives. There is

also a great need for protecting sensitive landscapes and endangered species.

In a step toward protecting some of these forest lands, the Alabama Forestry Commission – through an alliance with the USDA Forest Service, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), and the Alabama Forest Resources Center – is proud to announce the acquisition of the first Forest Legacy property in the state of Alabama: the Coon Gulf-Dixon Tract, located in Jackson County.

## **What is Forest Legacy?**

A national program, Forest Legacy is a partnership between participating states and the USDA Forest Service. Its purpose is to assist landowners and private land trusts, as well as state and local governments, in identifying and protecting sensitive landscapes and “environmentally important” forest lands being threatened by present and future conversion to non-forest uses. Created by

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Congress in the 1990 Farm Bill, the Forest Legacy Program was designed to assure that both traditional uses of private lands and the public values of America's forests resources are protected for future generations. Through the utilization of conservation easements and fee-simple purchase, the program has already conserved over 600,000 acres across 26 states and territories.

Environmentally important forest lands include those offering:

- Wildlife and fish habitats including rare, threatened, or endangered ecosystems
- Ecological values such as forest buffers that filter potential stream pollutants and stabilize soil.
- Beautiful scenery and recreational resources for wildlife photography, fishing, hiking, camping, canoeing, and swimming
- Culturally significant values such as unique geology, historic settlements and artifacts

## Forest Legacy in Alabama

In 2000, Governor Don Siegelman appointed the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) as the lead agency to develop and administer a Forest Legacy Program in consultation with the Alabama Forest Stewardship Advisory Committee. Since that time, the AFC – through the Alabama Forest Resources Center – has prepared the required

Assessment of Need document that explains both the criteria and processes of enrolling and purchasing properties through the program. Completed in 2002, this document allowed Alabama to submit its first Forest Legacy tract for approval: the Coon Gulf-Dixon Tract, which was purchased in 2003.

The Forest Legacy Program requires a 25 percent match for each project, which can be donated by landowners or other organizations. For some states, coming

up with this match has been a challenge. However, Alabama is very fortunate to have its own program that already preserves unique and important land and water: the "Forever Wild" land trust program. Created in 1992 and administered through the State Lands Division of the ADCNR, Alabama's Forever Wild provided the needed match for Coon Gulf. To date, that program has purchased 36 tracts totaling 102,650 acres.



*Coon Gulf's "Saltpeter Cave" has both biological and historical significance.*

*Photography by Brigetta Giles*



Other parties supporting the Forest Legacy purchase of Coon Gulf include The Tennessee Valley Authority's Resource Management Office and Natural Heritage Program, The Nature Conservancy of Alabama, The Land Trust of Huntsville and North Alabama, the Alabama Forest Resources Center, and the ADCNR.

The State Lands Division of the ADCNR will manage the property.

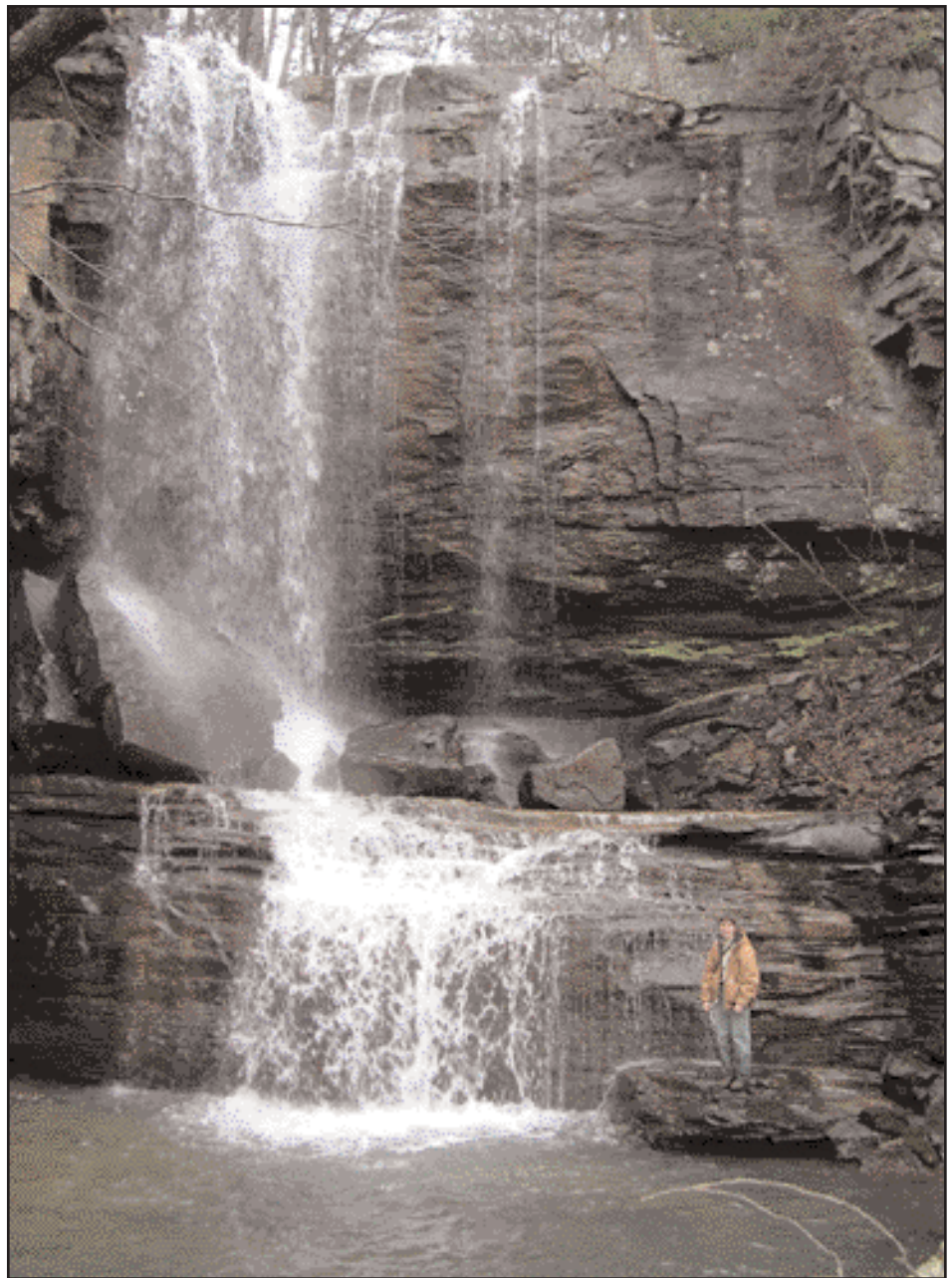
## Coon Gulf

Situated within the Sequatchie Valley district of the Cumberland Plateau and "Southern Appalachia," Coon Gulf is very scenic. Raccoon Creek has cut a large rugged canyon through the tract as it flows north off Sand Mountain into the Tennessee River. Defined as "karst" topography, its 656 acres are comprised of sandstone brow, limestone caves, and waterfalls. This upland deciduous forest, described as "cove" habitat, contains mesic pine and hardwood slopes (mature oak and hickory) and is one of the oldest communities of this type in Alabama.

In a survey conducted in the early 1990s, the Alabama Natural Heritage Program documented the presence of 33 species of plants and animals tracked as "rare or sensitive" for Alabama in the Coon Gulf area. This report also described the property as the very least disturbed of all "wild" lands in public ownership in the state. Bald eagles can be seen from the property, and a pair of bald eagles has successfully nested on the adjacent tract for the past several years.

Access to Coon Gulf is through the adjoining Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Raccoon Small Wild Area. These 2,366 acres surrounding the Raccoon Creek embayment of the Guntersville Lake currently provide various recreational activities.

Geological diversity is another of this region's attributes, being ranked in the top four in the nation in regard to cave density. One of the features of Coon Gulf is "Saltpeter Cave," which is both biologically and historically significant. Listed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a priority cave, it is presently a refuge for two federally listed bats: the gray bat (*Myotis grisescens*) and the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*). It also serves as a maternity colony for the rare Rafinesque's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus rafinesquii*).



*This photo emphasizes the magnitude of the Coon Gulf waterfalls as the author stands beside them.*

*Photography by Gary Wilkinson*

As tradition has it, the dark recesses of this sandstone cave provided both shelter and refuge to numerous Cherokee families during the Indian Removal of the 1830s. During the Civil War, Saltpeter Cave was also the site of historic mining activities by Confederate troops.

The scenic beauty and unique natural features of the Coon Gulf-Dixon Tract, combined with its invaluable forest community systems and wildlife make this property an excellent benchmark for the first Forest Legacy project in our state. Although much work remains to be accomplished, forthcoming public recreational opportunities at Coon Gulf will

include camping, hiking, backpacking, birding, fly-fishing, picnicing, and horseback riding.

For more information on the Forest Legacy Program, or to submit a tract of land for consideration, contact Dan Dumont with the Alabama Forest Resources Center at (251) 433-2372. Additional information on the program is available at [www.forestry.state.al.us](http://www.forestry.state.al.us) or you may contact Brigetta Giles with the Alabama Forestry Commission at (334) 240-9323. ♻️

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Source: *USDA Forest Service*